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‘Elles-Ils Islands’: Cartography of Lives and Deaths by Agnès Varda

Marie-Claire Barnet

Les cabanes, elles sont faites pour y poser des outils, pour s’y abriter, pour s’y planquer, pour avoir un coin à soi. Entre utilitaire et désir d’enfant, c’est un nid, c’est un endroit pour garder des trésors et des secrets.

Agnès Varda¹

Mot calme, que le mot plage; ample et court à la fois; le a s’allonge, le g chuinte légèrement, la bouche prend le temps, en bout de phrase, de former la syllabe qui s’étale, plage, sur un souffle. [...] Nostalgie, amours perdus, clichés qui s’écrivent sur la page très tôt reconnue des plages. [...] La plage est mâle et femelle, cambouis et crinolines, abysses et cachalots.

Marie Darrieussecq²

Je crois savoir pourquoi je t’ai donné rendez-vous dans ce lieu. L’eau. Je trouve que nous avons une relation forte avec l’eau. [...] Maintenant le soleil est parti, je suis toujours sur la plage, les couleurs sont belles. J’écoute la mer. J’aimerais que tu sois là maintenant avec moi pour l’entendre.

Sandrine Bonnaire³

AS A STARTING POINT, a simple but startling question to Agnès Varda with a complex answer: “Que serait ‘être au bon endroit’ aujourd’hui?”⁴ Reminding us that Varda has always been “where things happen(ed),” i.e. with the New Wave, in Cuba at the time of the revolution, in the USA with the Hippie movement and the Black Panthers, taking part in the feminist movement, or, more recently, taking sides with the social outcasts and the margins of a ‘liberal’ society, Jean-Marc Lalanne et Jean-Baptiste Morain could not have been surprised by her answer, as no one would be who has witnessed her impressive energy and enduring passion for her work and for our world: “Là où je suis maintenant. Au travail. Témoigner de ce que je comprends du monde par du cinéma et depuis quelque temps par des installations” (Lalanne and Morain 39).

My article will analyze some of her latest projects, the (nomadic, international) art installations that she invents, modulates, and thoughtfully adapts or alters, according to different spaces and cities. They follow therefore the location-scouting process of her films, driven by discovering places *and* people.⁵ I will focus on her relatively “new waves” and (mis)directions given in *L’Île et Elle*, her monumental efforts to recreate her world linked to the Île de Noir-

moutier, if not to say the big expanse of the Atlantic ocean, around the twenty-kilometre-long island, off the Western coast of France, which was her major exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in 2006, with echoes of her touring exhibitions of sea huts and portraits in Sète (2007) and Basel (2010):

Y'a un haut, y'a un bas.

Varda est en haut qui fait du cinéma (etcetera).

Agnès est en bas qui fait de la vidéo (L'île et elle).

À Noirmoutier, l'eau, c'est l'océan.

C'est intéressant et excitant pour moi que cet océan qui m'entoure et me *limite*. Toutes les vidéos, documentaires ou rêveuses, ont été tournées là. Je voudrais que, même différentes, les séquences du projet se répondent et recomposent *mon île*.⁶ [Don't be misled by her "limits" or her possessive adjective.]

Cinematic and critical detours

A brief dip into the vast body of Varda's film world can guide us along the themes I will study, revealing some aspects of Varda's varied conceptualization and staging of time and space in 3D. Her latest film to date, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008), offered a striking retrospective and self-reflexion on her work overall, revisiting many personal places (and exhibits), going in all directions, dating back from her early days in Belgium and the south of France. Filming and revisiting many of her work locations (photography, film, art installations) across Europe, beyond the North Sea or the Atlantic Ocean, crossing international borders, by following family ties, in the footsteps of her husband, Jacques Demy, who led her to Noirmoutier and LA, she even recreated the former courtyard at 'home' in Paris, doubling as her photographer's studio or 'taudis' in 1951, now called with upbeat derision a "petit paradis urbain" (Adler). This paradoxical 'taudis/paradis,' turning up in the 'artistic' shacks Varda is building around the world, might be another twist on Simon Starling's *Shedboatshed* (*Mobile Architecture, No 2*)⁷ or Le Corbusier's famous Mediterranean "cabanon,"⁸ all deceptively primitive sea huts.

No mouldy memory lanes of the past or dry deserts of loss and death were expected. With massive truckloads of sand, she staged her own fantasmatic "Paris Plage," a "Daguerre-Plage," right in front of her production headquarters and family home (Figure 1). This was one of her unexpected installations, out of the closed circuit of an art gallery, which functioned as a real play area for children, as well as a new *lieu de mémoire*, praised by the mayor (appropriating Pierre Nora's historical and national sense, at the local scale of *le quartier*). As such, it becomes "a gift to a community [... which] can come to belong to it in a real sense," as Alison Smith underlined about the re-appro-



FIGURE 1. “Daguerre-Plage.” Agnès Varda, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008). © Ciné-Tamaris.

priation of filmed places by viewers.⁹ Varda could be seen playing the mixed-up cliché of the grand grandmother, knitting or daintily raising an English teacup under her shocking pink hat (Ascot or *Demoiselles de Rochefort* style), sitting on a (displaced) posh velvet armchair. I'll come back to the many ways Varda keeps on exceeding both our expectations and the confinement of the potential “white cube” of the art gallery.¹⁰ These sandy spaces, sparks of a festive mood, and her “vagabond” moves from one Agnès beach to the next, show that Varda's introspective film, whimsically called “octofilmodocumentaire” (Adler) is not simply looking backwards and gazing at narcissistic mirrors. To make an art installation provides a privileged space of encounter and *partage* with others, as well as a dreamscape, in view of her own insistence on the ‘imaginary’ reality recreated, and the part to be played by *la rêverie*, to be shared by all: “Je voudrais que ces images, fixes ou animées, créent des surprises, éveillent des pensées et suscitent des rêveries.”¹¹ How to create and inhabit an installation, or a film, drifting along in one's own inner world: “Mon projet. Raconter l'Île de Noirmoutier en imaginant la réalité.” This inner world becomes the curious sea hut made up of old film strips, *La Cabane de l'échec* (renamed *La Cabane de cinéma* for the Biennale d'Art de

Lyon), “on peut s’y abriter en rêvant aux films qui nous ont plu” (Raspail 288). For Varda, installation art and film are meant to provide such freedom to dream on and on, as echoed by the set goals of the DVD bonus material, “boni”: “l’œuvre dérivée du film (*Les Plages d’Agnès*), [donne] une autre amorce pour les gens qui aiment bien s’y retrouver, rêver” (Adler).

The many connotations of the term “cartography” that this article will explore follow Pierre Sansot’s revisions of landscapes with a human touch, and how we live in and out of all kinds of “variations paysagères” or how we can even go back to a new idea of “paysage sentimental,” without any fear of “épanchements larmoyants,” as “l’affectivité constitue un rôle constituant (du paysage).”¹² My article is also influenced by Giuliana Bruno’s re-imagining of “(senti)mental,” corporeal, and “concrete” maps of our meanderings in art galleries, all traces to be followed in and off the wall, or on the screen in the “gendered” movie ‘house.’¹³ In revisiting Varda’s exhibition, I refer to Bruno’s sense of the “haptic geography” of these peculiar “lived sites,” a body- and mind-centred “atlas of emotion” to be found in art galleries, still perhaps perceived as “a community of strangers,” but where one can be “absorbed and absorbing,” moving along and moved by an intersubjective dynamics (Bruno 64). Art spaces can become a funny hall of distorting mirrors, the very site to project (give and take) phantasms of (self-)recognition. I also bear in mind Claire Bishop’s notion of the decentring experience of the gallery viewer,¹⁴ and Florence de Mèredieu’s critique of compulsory interactive installation art¹⁵. My (open-ended) lines of thought are deeply indebted to Griselda Pollock’s radical reconceptualizations of what she calls our potential, virtual feminist museums,¹⁶ displacing the notion of the museum from the aesthetical cage of canonical art history, situating it squarely in the middle of our present socio-political and ethical arena in a way that reaches into the riskiest corners of our unconscious. My goal will be to navigate along Varda’s “differencing” (Pollock 14) art work, which is mobile, rather than simply moving, always on the move, art work that is finally wall-breaking.

No real need for formal maps, since a completely new type of “sentimental cartography” (Bruno 64) and an altogether playful mapping seem preferable, the kind of treasure-island style of fun and games that La Fondation Cartier provides in *Le Petit Guide des enfants*. But Varda’s personal *lieux de mémoire*, doubling as vibrating *lieux de vie*, were highlighted on her own version of the map, linked to her *coups de cœur* for people and places, and locating her cat’s grave. Linking widows’ homes, front gardens, lounges or bedrooms to the backdrop of the ever-present beach, she gave us more than rooms with views, as she collected series of interior landscapes to be pieced together

in her own puzzle of double *paysages intimes/extimes*.¹⁷ The video installation of *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier* can be seen as such a dual landscape, within another huge, fragmented landscape, in an endless game of Chinese boxes or *boîtes à surprises*, a principle she uses with the billboard of the blond beach babe, *La Grande Carte postale*, where activating buttons reveals new vistas with short films, even a ghostly Victorian mermaid.

This exhibition of (personal and others') emotions required an installation where waves and sonic space conveyed the tempo of a heartbeat, and a central or sacred space where heartfelt secrets of islanders could be divulged and opened up as unexpected island treasures. I will explore what can be deduced from the (re)writing of mental/emotional maps she leads us to in her installations, and the visual/textual puns she adds to holiday clichés, for example questioning gender biased stereotypes, such as "*La Veuve était (toujours) en noir*," in Noirmoutier (not necessarily *noir*) or elsewhere.¹⁸

Ground floor and -0: emotional highs

Many critics have offered in-depth studies of all the areas of the exhibition, and Varda herself edited a double volume on *L'Île et Elle*: the exhibition catalogue (which reads as Varda's scrapbook and textual "*boni*" on the project), and *Regards sur l'exposition* (a collage of essays from diverse experts, friends and an anonymous and eloquent viewer).¹⁹ The catalogue and essays can be read as virtual tours and multiple points of entry to Varda's emblematic island. The coupling of nouns and pronouns, *l'île/il* and *elle*, may have alerted visitors that relationships between the sexes, as well as queries about gendered identity, could be another central theme and source of friction. A teasing and tickling of the imagination was announced, therefore, from the very start, outside, by a combination of linguistic and visual puns. The gigantic glass doors of the Fondation Cartier had a puzzling reproduction of Varda as a seated giantess, creating the temptation to see the announcement of a self-portrait with an inflated ego. Yet the accompanying extra-large picture of an empty blue chair had meanings that visitors had still to decipher for themselves by passing through the entrance doors (Figure 2). Marguerite Duras' democratic wish, "tout le monde sur la plage,"²⁰ was vibrating around Varda's installation, as visitors got their fair and colourful share of a popular communal spirit, represented in the (singsong) *Ping Pong, Tong et Camping* installation.

We have to take into account the inherent difficulty faced in re-examining any temporary art installation, which constitutes a kind of "Ground Zero" marked by the fear of radical erasure. As Isabelle McNeill astutely highlighted in her luminous study of traces of our "filmic" experience and memory (on



FIGURE 2. "The Blue Chair." Agnès Varda, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008). © Ciné-Tamaris.

and off the shape-shifting, status-changing, screens of film in cinema, museums, DVDs, or *tout le cinéma* produced in our unconscious), art installations have to be experienced in situ and during a limited period of time (McNeill 72). These two spatial and temporal factors cannot be easily reproduced by websites or books, even if the latter prolong considerably the ephemeral exhibition. I can only go back to my own (ever-changing) memory of the (necessarily subjective) experienced visit, as I reread reviews and catalogues, and review the edited short films offered by the Arte version of *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*, drawing in the process almost unavoidable comparisons with some of Varda's filmic corpus. The attempt to grasp the temporary installation, which seems paradoxically to start with a kind of dead end or blind spot once the exhibition is over and no longer visible, leads in fact to the proliferation of new perspectives I will underline.

A question arises, with the Freudian joke being on us: what do museum-goers want? A worse question would be, or a worse scenario for our identities, potentially more shattered by experiencing a massive art attack: who or where is this supposedly ideal(ised) "pensive spectator," and not the (presumably

guilty, indifferent) passer-by, rushing through, hiding behind her/his digital camera? The answer, by way of another question that follows a point raised by W. J. T. Mitchell: what do museums want (us to do/feel)?²¹ “In an art museum, writes John Walsh, the key function, the greatest and most valuable thing it can do, is to give visitors a profound experience of works of art.”²² Beyond the vague profundity to which Walsh’s comment refers, I admire the potentiality he underlines of what the museum “can do,” the shameless bringing back of “tears, light, and seats” in the museum gallery.

An art exhibition may go on living on in our (un)conscious much longer than we can account for. That’s precisely what the anonymous letter included in *Regards sur l’exposition* alluded to: the heap of salt that visitors could see (no touching, there are limits to tactile encounters promoted in museums, except on the last day when people were invited to take this *fleur de sel* home), contained biblical and ecological undertones, created by an inscription on the wall (which Varda suspects nobody read): “Si le sel perd sa saveur, qui le lui rendra?”²³ In this visitor’s mind, the vision of a “nuage de sel” seemed to morph and, paradoxically, went on growing, instead of being swept away from the gallery (as was literally the case).

How to give a memorable ‘fresh’ sea view of *La Mer immense*, we may ask. “It’s also a kind of dream because the screen is never enough, big, to show a big ocean.”²⁴ Varda’s double installation of a gigantic screen to project a beach scene, next to a ‘smallish’ photograph of this (still) scene, framed in a gilded and ornate frame, pointed out that this challenging prospect cannot be achieved easily and that many aesthetical questions (rather than answers and solutions) were at the heart of her multi-media project. Another installation, *Le Triptyque de Noirmoutier*, gave other side glances at the beach on the side panels one was invited to open or close, and so did the whole reconstruction of the crossing to the island, *Le Passage du Gois*, which lured visitors’ gazes along the walls where beach reverse shots were projected too. Interaction took another dimension: spectators were endlessly invited to gain new viewpoints and lose them, dropping your guard, changing positions, while smiling at the beach film projected on an inflated lilo or funny “(écran) dodu” (Varda, *L’Île et Elle* 54), or meditating around the ‘empty’ *Cabane de l’échec*, with an irresistible (and partly invisible) seascape all around springing to mind.²⁵ “The inflated mattress: it’s a way of saying, can we change the way we look at things, can we change the relation?”²⁶

The journey visitors could take was also an inner voyage, a potentially “risky” business for both the artist and the viewer, as “emotional” minefields loom in the artistic arena, as explored by Varda herself in many conversations

on the subject.²⁷ As *La Mer ...etSetera* would make clearly visible, pictures will be as easily smashed, frames lose their four borders, and the hall of distorting mirrors that reproduce the sea waves rolling on film/the walls will come to no good: “c’est en même temps l’idée du puzzle et de la fragilité des images [...] tout est un peu illusoire.” Varda has no illusion about the limits of representation, but she plays with 3D possibilities to destabilize viewers, in and out of the comfort zone of their viewing practices in art spaces.

As we pieced together the “puzzle” or “polyptique” of the 14 screens of *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*, we were invited to share widows’ highly intimate but conflicting testimonies, just as we may have ended up moving on to the next room or weeping in public. Varda herself appeared on one of the monitors of this installation, looking ahead at the camera, but looking also at no one, as her gaze became increasingly self-reflexive. She seemed to try not to cry. Emotions spring from such uncertainty, tension, and *non-dit*. As Varda well knows, she does not control our reactions; however, she tested her own vulnerability when revealing her own grief about losing Jacques Demy: the footage of a ‘homemade’ film showing her grief- and Aids-stricken husband, trying hard to smile, interrupted the viewer’s sole focus on Varda’s sphinx-like expression. We had been greeted by the same puzzling portrait of Varda with the blue chair, reproduced on the giant entrance door, and now each visitor had to gaze back, via the smaller monitor in the corner of the puzzle, having to come face to face with hard-to-tell tales of unbearable loss.

The walking-around process in art galleries was slowed down and even interrupted by *Les Veuves*. One had to sit, take time, and change seats to view the whole installation, fragmented into fourteen screens in the darkened room, with headsets and messy cables for “la ronde [des] *chaises musicales*”²⁸ reproducing the very theme of the 35mm film shown as the central piece, the procession and dissolution of a strange parade, widows walking around a dark wood kitchen table, out of place on the beach. The other short films portraying interviews with widows, going on a loop, added undeniable movement and a variable (focal/emotional) blur to this personal and collective “portrait brisé.”²⁹ Varda created a dual and dizzying space of “solitude” (Frodon) and potential compassion, keeping instant identification or “easy” sentimentality at bay. We took her place by proxy, as if sitting across the (other) kitchen table of some of the widows. Literally and metaphorically, we sat across from her (not so silent, singing) self-portrait, too. It’s not that simple to look people in the eye, or identify with them, even if Varda’s visual tricks made it appear as if one could. We might remember that Marina Abramovic’s staring performance in New York provoked uncontrollable tears.³⁰ By multiplying view-

points, Varda mastered the subtle art of stirring a tide and flow of emotions, illuminating the ambiguity of all that is said or seen, not so much to avoid, but to bring us straight back to, the heart of messy feelings (the widows', her own, even ours). As Marie Darrieussecq eloquently summarized, this was definitively not easy or collective viewing, even if one may have felt like reaching out to one's neighbour (to pass on the headset, or another kind of deeply embodied experience at the museum), when one realised Demy's symbolic blue chair remains empty, next to Varda's: "On se tourne vers son voisin, on a la gorge serrée, mais lui, il est en train de sourire, ou de rêver. Assis sur ces quatorze chaises, on pense tous en même temps à la même chose mais différemment (Darrieussecq, *Cinq photographies* 41).

Varda brilliantly mixed the inside and "offside," the off-screen or unsaid of her tales, filming insights and outdoors, at many levels: told from private homes or (secret) gardens, stories of the past unfolded, including the taboo of suicide, dreadfully "silly" accidents (sailors who cannot swim), the raw turmoil of a recent bereavement, uneasy relationships with uncongenial partners, harsh work in the salt marshes or relentless poverty (living in a "real" shack, with three children, little coal, and only 50 centimetres around the omnipresent kitchen table) were contrasted to tales of enduring love, proudly displayed and cherished pictures, a shared sense of resilience, and quite strikingly constant reminders of the present and life going on, offered by shots of the working fields or the sea harbour. The chosen documentary approach did not romanticize, but repeated focus on hands turning their wedding rings made us see what the filmmaker wanted us to notice, a body language that tugged at her own heart strings.

As Bibi van der Zee commented upon "melting hearts" facing "climate change art" in Copenhagen, "weeping only takes you so far."³¹ Where to go next? Anywhere, and especially "sous la surface des choses."³² Varda's profoundly 'moving' experiments with reframing, refracting, and (de)constructing pictures/movies in galleries, and all her curiously uncanny sheds or "maisons rouillées,"³³ as encountered and sung in *La Mer* by Charles Trenet that go on touring around the globe, probably take us back and forth in time and space in different ways, elsewhere, rather than where we thought we were standing, momentarily contemplating her pieces.

Exposing family clichés and gender types

Just as Varda refuses to distinguish between her life and her film work, she likes to mingle inextricably the private and the public. This doesn't mean she doesn't question, show, and tell us about issues relating to boundaries, fric-

tions, and contradictions. The individual is linked to the collective, and vice versa, in a way that is always socio-political and highly charged with feminist influences. As Varda stated in 1975, and as is echoed in *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*, “Je suis une femme mais je suis aussi toutes les femmes.”³⁴ She may insist she has recreated her home as cinema (*La Cabane de l'échec* became *La Cabane de cinéma*), but her sense of a carefree ‘home sweet home’ may be just as well located in the museum itself and may even migrate to her metaphorical *cabane*, the courtyard next to her “coin bureau”: “Mon début d’apaisement et de bonheur, c’est quand même dans les musées, ou bien alors dans ma petite cour carrée de rien du tout, avec quelques arbres, les enfants, les petits-enfants qui viennent, ça, c’est un autre domaine où chacun peut trouver du plaisir et du bonheur” (Adler). We might recognize a corner from Le Louvre in this much loved “cour carrée.” Moreover, as ambivalent paradoxes and *dédoulements* have shown before, we cannot expect only signs of playing happy families in her art installations. Commenting on a house’s “zones d’ombre” and family dynamics glanced in an “imaginary” family album, Varda states the limits of family stories: “Finalement, les maisons racontent bien les familles, et les familles racontent bien ce qu’elles veulent, et les photographies racontent un peu de ce mystère, de ce que personne ne veut raconter.”³⁵

“L’Eden existe, c’est une plage”: let’s add a question mark to the statement, as Varda’s irony and wit had already shattered “*Le Bonheur*” and the bourgeois dream of private property in the south of France.³⁶ Let’s consider another parallel between family and “un îlot de paix,”³⁷ a little h(e)aven and retreat from the sound and fury of the world. Varda’s use of a marine metaphor to figure her family is both far-reaching and far-fetched. How can we forget the sea all around, omnipresent in her art work or in this mapping of her kinship, and underestimate the treacherous associations our collective imaginary creates involving the sea, *la mer/mère*, homonyms that become absurd when the indifference of the sea is recognised, as Laurent Joffrin has noted.³⁸ Far from circumscribing her family/familiar world to the (maritime, matriarchal) privacy of a territory which also connotes negative images of insular detachment and exclusion,³⁹ Varda opens up her holiday home, herself, to the public, throwing the shutters literally half or wide open, in the *Tryptique de Noirmoutier* (visitors’ active participation required), as she deconstructs and reinvents all kinds of houses. There is nothing simply or exclusively “maternal” (Frodon) in houses. It is no wonder Varda ends up not recognizing her own kitchen, used as the backdrop of her *Triptyque*.

As Sandra Flitterman-Lewis aptly noted, Varda seems more interested in pointing to “le ‘portrait impossible’ [de la féminité] [qui] résonne de possibi-

lités multiples.”⁴⁰ *La Cabane des portraits*, confronting visitors with rows of portraits of islanders, men facing women, and flanked by iconic symbols of gender, pictures of a lighthouse and a mussel, created such potential in this challenging impossibility. Pollock commented that erasing modernist work on abstraction and reducing Georgia O’Keefe’s own intentions to represent female genitalia as (her famous) flowers can only lead to simplistic and “ludicrous” associations (Pollock 117). A similar work on form and frame is clearly visible in Varda’s photomontage. Pictures of faces may bear signs of ‘femininity’ (“Être une femme, c’est avoir un visage de femme”⁴¹), but these pictures were playing with frames within frames (a picture was a backdrop for each portrait), adding extra Freudian symbols with a wink and question marks. These portraits could be seen as weirdly blank, the tip of the iceberg of the (naked) body, as exhibited in *La Grande Carte postale* which, at first glance, showed nothing but a blond sex bomb—the sexist type of seaside postcard does look obsolete, the whole odalisque looks weird, as Varda’s daughter’s head has been added to the body. However, manipulating a console triggered short films, one of them showing little boys playing at being Peeping Toms (Tati’s *M. Hulot* or Demy’s *La Luxure* [1961] sprang to mind), and Varda’s representation of the loaded female body had a resolutely ambivalent and playful side. A childish and childlike voyeurism is also displayed here via the short film, and, if that voyeurism is turned right back upon the curious viewer, with echoes of dubious jokes or classic slapstick comedies (the Lumière Brothers’ *L’Arroseur arrosé* [1895]), one may bear in mind that this voyeurism is not a gender-blind practice (both boys and girls seek visions of nudity of each other) but a genderless one, as Varda commented upon “kicks for kids” shared by her daughter, or as Jenny Doyle noted about her sisters and her twelve-year-old self, studying male nudes and looking at as many porn catalogues as their young male neighbour.⁴²

Other visual tricks were on Varda’s mind: she wanted us to think of the invisible, the impossible or the complicated to tell, the secret sexual lives these faces were not showing (Varda, *L’Île et Elle* 43). We may think of Jacques Derrida’s answer to the “ultimate” question to ask philosophers, “leur vie sexuelle [...]. Ce dont ils ne parlent pas.”⁴³ *La Cabane des portraits* is also an invitation to reconsider the too good/too bad to be true *masculin/féminin* split in the *cabane de noirmoutin(e)s*, which will find echoes in *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*. Marie Darrieussecq noticed the striking “femme au beau visage d’homme.”⁴⁴ One might have seen a few more “bi-gendered” faces, which meant facing one’s own definitions of gender, as well as wondering about married life, or life and death, as in life with an enhanced sense of death. As

a widow states, “Je fais couple avec un mort,” we start to guess many questions Varda has asked or implied: what does it mean to be(come) a widow, and live with/without an impossible “absent presence.” Another widow reminds us that her solitude is also relative: “ici, la maison est habitée. Y a quelque chose de lui qui reste là, je ne suis pas seule”? Astonishingly, some bedrooms were flung open to visitors in the filmed interviews with these widows, and between the lines, when (unheard) questions focused on the widow’s changing sides (or not) in the big bed, one probably thought also about the loss of sex (or desire), or the ways the body and mind could try to cope, to bring back presence, warmth, passion: “je fais du feu.” As Roland Barthes pointed out, it is far easier to reproduce linguistic clichés about sex and weddings than evoke and connote no-sex with mourning the “première nuit de noces. Mais première nuit de deuil?”⁴⁵

There was no question of introducing a suspicious elephant in the room, by hiding Demy’s AIDS or bisexuality, for Varda does not limit identities to (confusing) signs or symbols of sexuality, sexual orientation or gender, preferring to hint instead at *le non-dit*, and all the complex issues of privacy while respecting Demy’s own silence, as explored explicitly in *Les Plages d’Agnès*. Nothing was ever fixed in black and white in her film or her art work, as shown on the beach/ballet scene in the ‘family reunion’ in *Les Plages d’Agnès*: all grandchildren and children wear white, ‘children’ are also grownups, and Agnès is (temporarily) in black, underlining divergences, and a sense of confusion instead of fusion, with her “immediate family”: “Je ne sais pas si je les connais [...] les comprends.”

So what to add, after all is said or shown as *indicible*? How to make the explosion of contrasting colors that Varda can produce so well strike us even deeper (see the Warholian infusion of Technicolor in the travelling shot at the beginning of *Les Cent et une nuits de Simon Cinéma* [1995])? A lingering memory of colour I have from the exhibition of *L’Île et Elle* is not linked to the exuberant, plastic world of *Ping Pong, Tong et Camping*, it’s in the portrait of “Agnès with the blue chair.” But what I found more mesmerizing than the retouching of the déjà vu chair (the style is Van Gogh’s *Chair* [1888]) was the contrast of two *touches de couleur*, her black widow’s uniform displaying one sleeve in raspberry pink, the other in avocado green.

Sonic waves

Varda’s recreation of her sea world opened up an absorbing sonic space of waves, echoing visually and reverberating audibly from the basement, where Ami Flammer’s violin score for *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier* was played.⁴⁶

Jonathan Raban has illuminated the “obsession”, and ongoing popularity of the waves, by examining the source(s) of their polyphonic potential: “for several thousands of years, the waves have been talking power and sex and death to us: it’s hardly surprising that we watch and listen so raptly.”⁴⁷ Highlighting that even if waves are one of the most ancient, “most laden and suggestive,” symbols on earth (“the first Neolithic decoration on the rim of a cooking pot”), Raban concludes that their magnetic appeal is far from being clear-cut and explainable, as perceptions will inevitably differ: “People hear in the waves what they bring to the waves” (186). Perceptions rhyme with the personal. Flammer’s violin piece will also generate different reactions, even if it has been described usually as monotonous and melancholy. The (widows’) music can therefore sound like a pensive piece of string music, getting more complex on repeated listening (as heard on a loop). Far from being flat, even if the pitch is medium range, the sound makes audible a dual melody, with subtle but real friction, a long movement of the bow resolving the friction at the end, while the accompanying waves in the soundtrack play a third line in this orchestra and never seem to want to go away.⁴⁸

We don’t control images either: “images, they grow in ourselves, they move, they become something else.”⁴⁹ Back on the beach, the empty chair left by Demy, painted blue by Agnès, paradoxically not to be “so blue” about loss, death, and memory, reminded me of Jane Hirshfield’s lines about loss and the relationship “between the material world and the world of feeling.”⁵⁰ I didn’t see resignation on Varda’s (trans)fixed face but what could look like Hirshfield’s sense of “acceptance” (with another puzzling chair) in the aftermath of death: “I long for the calm acceptance of a bentwood chair” (Hirshfield 88). Blue, the favourite colour with variable properties, as analyzed by Michel Pastoureau,⁵¹ will also bring endless associations. The light blue chosen by Varda did not quite match Demy’s visible jean jacket, recalling instead *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort*’s blue, blue headbands for little ballerinas, blue café tables, blue shutters, and the same light blue, blown out of proportions, invading the whole screen, and joyfully cancelling all missed opportunities at the very end of his film.

Final words

There is another portrait of Varda we will not see exhibited but may catch in airports: the artist and filmmaker explained her recent fondness for wheel-chairs before flights, used to avoid queues, as well as to keep her camera steady, shooting strictly forbidden travelling shots (Adler). Art changes directions, and in *L’Île et Elle*, if it was not “a move to forget,” as Emma Wilson

persuasively noted about *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, it is still decidedly beyond the boundaries of expectations or expertise, experimentally *sauvage*, about “salvaging” (not salvation), and “a move on to the future.”⁵² Varda is still looking for another ‘free’ space to send us back her news about ourselves: “Je fais des portraits brisés, qui sont cassés, dans un miroir cassé, parce que ça m’intéresse, parce que je sens que les gens sont un peu en pièces et que peut-être on peut témoigner de ça en les regardant attentivement, en inventant des brisures artificielles qui sont des miroirs cassés et des choses comme ça, donc je recherche quelque chose d’autre—une liberté.”⁵³

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Notes

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3. Sandrine Bonnaire, *Le Soleil me trace la route* (Paris: Stock, 2010), 227.
4. Jean-Marc Lalanne and Jean-Baptiste Morain, “Retenir quelque chose qui s’en va,” *Les Inrockuptibles*, 681 (16 December 2008): 39.
5. Laure Adler, “Hors champs,” *France Culture*, 17 May 2010.
6. See <http://demy.chez.com/06ileetelle.htm> (accessed 15 September 2010).
7. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/2005/simonstarling.htm> (accessed 15 September 2010).
8. See http://www.e-architect.co.uk/london/le_corbusier_exhibition.htm (accessed 15 September 2010).
9. Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 1998), 90.
10. See Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000). See how “the ‘white cube’ has a surprising longevity and is reinvented in the latest museum concepts,” in Christopher Grunberg “The Modern Art Museum,” in Emma Barker, ed., *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (London: The Open University, 1999), 48.
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13. Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2007), 64.
14. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate, 2005), 130.
15. Florence Méredieu, *Arts et nouvelles technologies: art vidéo, art numérique* (Paris: Larousse, 2005), 230-31.
16. Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007).
17. Michel Tournier, *Journal extime* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).
18. Cf. Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End* (London: Granta, 2009), 13.
19. Agnès Varda, *L’Île et Elle* and *L’Île et Elle: regards sur l’exposition* (Arles: Actes Sud/Fondation Cartier, 2006). See Antony Fiant et al., eds., Agnès Varda: *Le Cinéma et au-delà* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009); Shirley Jordan, “Spatial and Emotional Limits in Installation Art: Agnès Varda’s *L’Île et Elle*,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies, Sites* 13:5 (2009): 581-88; Isabelle McNeill, *Memory and the Moving Image: French Film in the Digital Era* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U P, 2010), 51-53 and 70-76.

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23. Charles Trenet, *La Mer* (1946).
24. Interview with Chris Darke, *Agnès Varda about L'Île et Elle*, London, Ciné Lumière, 28 October 2006. My warmest thanks to Julien Planté for the recorded interview.
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28. Marie Darrieussecq, "Cinq photographies de veuves et *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*," in Varda, *L'Île et Elle: Regards sur l'exposition*, 40.
29. See Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 2005.
30. See Varda's discussion of Abramovic's retrospective, *The Artist is present* (MOMA, New York, March-April 2010), in Adler and <http://marinaabramovicmademecry.tumblr.com/> (accessed 1 October 2010).
31. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/dec/11/copenhagen-climate-change-art> (accessed 13 October 2010).
32. See <http://culturebox.france3.fr/all/9865/agnes-vara-exposition-a-sete-la-mer-etsetera/> (accessed 26 September 2010).
33. Trenet.
34. See Agnès Varda, *Réponse de femmes* (1975), in *Varda tous courts* (Paris: Ciné-Tamaris, 2007).
35. Agnès Varda, *Une minute pour une image* (FR3, 1983), in Varda 2007.
36. Agnès Varda, *Le Bonheur* (1965).
37. Mathilde Blottière, "Les Plages d'Agnès: Demy tout entier," *Télérama*, 3070 (12 November 2008): 50.
38. Laurent Joffrin, *Libération* (21-22 August 2010), Carnet Été, VI.
39. "C'est pas facile quand on n'était pas de l'île," *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*.
40. Sandra Flitterman-Lewis, "Sans toit ni loi: le 'portrait impossible' de la féminité," in Ginette Vincendeau and Bérénice Reynaud, eds., *20 ans de théories féministes sur le cinéma, CinémaAction*, 67 (1993): 176.
41. Varda, *Réponse de femmes*, 1975.
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43. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, *Derrida* (Jane Doe Films, 2002).
44. Darrieussecq 2006, 40.
45. Roland Barthes, *Journal de deuil*, Nathalie Léger, ed. (Paris: Seuil/Imec, 2009), 13.
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47. Jonathan Raban, *Driving Home: An American Scrapbook* (London: Picador, 2010), 186.
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50. Jane Hirshfield, *After* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006), 88.
51. See Michel Pastoureau, *Bleu: histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).
52. Emma Wilson, "Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse: Salvage and the Art of Forgetting," in Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham, eds., *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), 92.
53. See bell hooks, "Many folks feel no sense of place. What they know, what they have is a sense of crisis," *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.